ABSTRACT

A Critical Study of the First World War Poets
(1914 -1918): A Reassessment
In the foregoing pages an attempt has been made to study five eminent poets of the First World War. They are Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke & Sorley and Edmund Blunden. They are the poets who actually enlisted themselves in the war and therefore they had the first hand experience of the conditions of the front and the life in trenches.

The first and the most important poet in this regard is Wilfred Owen. Owen’s struggle with, loss, despair, pity and alienation threaten to undermine everything he fights for. In the case of Owen as a war poet he addresses the realities of the war as they were. For example, in “Disabled” he not only reveals the ‘young soldiers’ physical wounds but also exposes the man’s mental anguish and dissatisfaction with the current situation. He uses his poems to speak about the horrible terror he had experienced. Certainly Owen’s war poetry is a driving force
behind his emergence as a strong and original poet of the First World War.

Owen’s war experiences took him out of the boundaries of Romanticism. The quest for truth prompted some of his greatest works of the time. Like Sassoon Owen also wrote in reaction to the propagandized view of the war that was being made public throughout England. Newspaper accounts of the Great War seemed as baseless and absurd. It added fuel to the fire and made him ‘angry young poet’. As Paul Fussel rightly asserts that, though Owen had been strikingly optimistic but Owen’s first hand experience in the mid of the January, 1917 changed everything. Owen wrote about his feelings in his poems to express his message as directly as possible. The cumulative effect of his war experiences opened an ideal avenue to raise questions about the meaning of war.

Some of his poems such as, “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young”, and “Disabled” lash out against what he may have considered the nonsensical and unaccountable death of young soldiers. Others such as “The Last Laugh”, and “The Sentry”, describe in detail the trauma and horrors of the trenches and the battlefields. Had he not joined the army, and experienced the trenches, probably he would not have penned his most
famous poems or be remembered as one of the greatest war poets of the First World War. Owen’s war poetry is not only the truthful expression of the trench condition but a living memory for all generations to come. Had he survived it is very difficult to say where he would have led. Some critics are of the opinion that, in Owen’s case, it was the subject matter that made the poet. Unfortunately his untimely death could not allow Owen to prove it otherwise. Nevertheless, the poetry of Owen continues to draw attention and acclaim in every sense of the term.

The chapter on Sassoon’s poetry focuses not only on the angry voice and disillusionment but also on his efforts to create a meaning out of the conflict. He still maintains his reputations among the readers of English poetry and hopefully will always inspire the greatest of all poets Wilfred Owen and others as well. Sassoon’s poetry is always said to be the voice of anger and disillusionment, but also provided an opportunity to voices that had been silent. His sense of anger stems from his feelings of complete disillusionment. Sassoon’s poetry denounces the war and its intensity of violence, aimed at wiping out the human civilization.
If Sassoon tries to hold on to his anger, Brooke attempts to step away from anger and disillusion. He takes war as a driving force of eternity and peace. It was war that provided him to seek shelter against the troubles and sufferings he was coping with. Apart from his sacrificial urge towards the war the undercurrent of his feeling is not simply something to live with but something to live by.

Sorley corresponds to the elegiac tone speaking of the myriads who are destined to die. His prophetic imagination in his war poems is a testimony of the horrors of war that would swallow the mass of humanity. Sorley, perhaps, may be seen as a forerunner of Owen and Sassoon. His unsentimental style stands in direct contrast to that of Rupert Brooke. Sorley’s last poem which was discovered from his kit after his death, include some of his most famous lines:

“When you see millions of mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go…”

Despite the horrors of the First World War Sorley felt it had freed his spirit. He stands out startlingly straightforward in search of a meaningful life hereafter. He seems to be fearless in search of spirituality.
Edmund Charles Blunden consequently goes into a grey land of loss, despair and hopelessness. Indeed he is not violent as Sassoon but the words and terminology he has used express a tireless and continuous sense of alienation, despair and helplessness. He shoots out words after words of frustration against the war. He seems to be a tired and helpless man searching for something meaningful. His personal accord of his war experiences in Undertones of War is hailed as the greatest and lasting tribute to the unknown soldier. He is well-known as a poet and autobiographer but was haunted for the rest of his life by his experiences as a young infantry officer.

In short, it may be said that some way or the other all of these war poets believed war as a destructive force which reduced human beings and their beliefs to hopelessness, despair and agony. Despite their differences in conceptualization and presentation of the war each of these poets face the same existentialist problem.